

# MOOCS, OPENNESS AND CHANGING EDUCATOR PRACTICES: AN ACTIVITY THEORY CASE STUDY

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# MOOCs, openness and changing educator practices: an Activity Theory case study

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Paper at <http://www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk/abstracts/pdf/P26.pdf>



Centre for  
Innovation in  
Learning and  
Teaching

# Context

- Global South low producers of OER
  - Participate relatively minimally in open learning and teaching
- Emerging culture of enabling openness at UCT, open agenda
  - Cape Town Open Declaration 2008; Berlin Declaration 2011; Open Scholarship; OERUCT; OpenUCT
- UCT MOOCs project (3 years, 12 MOOCs)
- Grantee of ROER4D Impact Study (Sub-project 10.3)

## Links

UCT MOOCs: <http://www.cilt.uct.ac.za/cilt/moocs-project-uct>

ROER4D Sub-project 10.3: <http://roer4d.org/sp10-3-impact-of-oer-in-and-as-moocs-in-south-africa>

# UCT MOOCs project



**Medicine and the Arts:**

One of first major MOOC initiatives in Africa

Partnership with FutureLearn and Coursera




**What is a Mind?**

12 MOOCs+ over 3 years

Intention for OER outputs of MOOC materials



**Understanding clinical research**



**Education for all**

4 MOOCs researched

# Research question

Interested in whether and how educators' practices become more open – through the process of creating and teaching in a MOOC


How do educators' openness-related **practices** change (or not change) when using (or not using – OER) in and as a **MOOC**?


<http://roer4d.org/sp10-3-impact-of-oer-in-and-as-moocs-in-south-africa>


# Elaborated questions


- How do educators engage with Open Educational Resources (OERs) and openness as part of the MOOC's development?
- How do educators' practices change or not change when using (or not using) OERs in and as a MOOC?
  - Did the educators' practices change? – In what way?
  - Did educators' (reported) practices become more open?
  - What was their understanding of openness before the MOOC ran?
  - What was their understanding of openness after the MOOC ran?
  - How did it change?


# Medicine and the Arts: Humanising Healthcare


To do


Activity


Replies


Progress


WEEK  
**1**

WEEK  
**2**

WEEK  
**3**

WEEK  
**4**

WEEK  
**5**

WEEK  
**6**

29 Feb

7 Mar

14 Mar


21 Mar

28 Mar

4 Apr

WEEK 1: THE HEART OF THE MATTER: A MATTER OF THE HEART

9 weeks ago



Introduction to Medicine and the Arts

In this course we explore the field of the medical humanities - the intersection of the arts, humanities and healthcare.

1.1

WELCOME TO THE COURSE VIDEO (06:37)

1.2

SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE DISCUSSION

1.3


ROLE OF THE MEDICAL HUMANITIES IN HUMANISING HEALTHCARE VIDEO (02:23)

1.4

HOW TO USE FUTURELEARN ARTICLE

1.5

HOW THE COURSE WORKS ARTICLE



Issues of the Heart

The heart of the matter, a matter of the heart – beginning our exploration into the medical humanities.





[View transcript](#)

Download video: [standard](#) or [HD](#)

# Welcome to the course

Our aim in this course is to facilitate exploration and engagement of

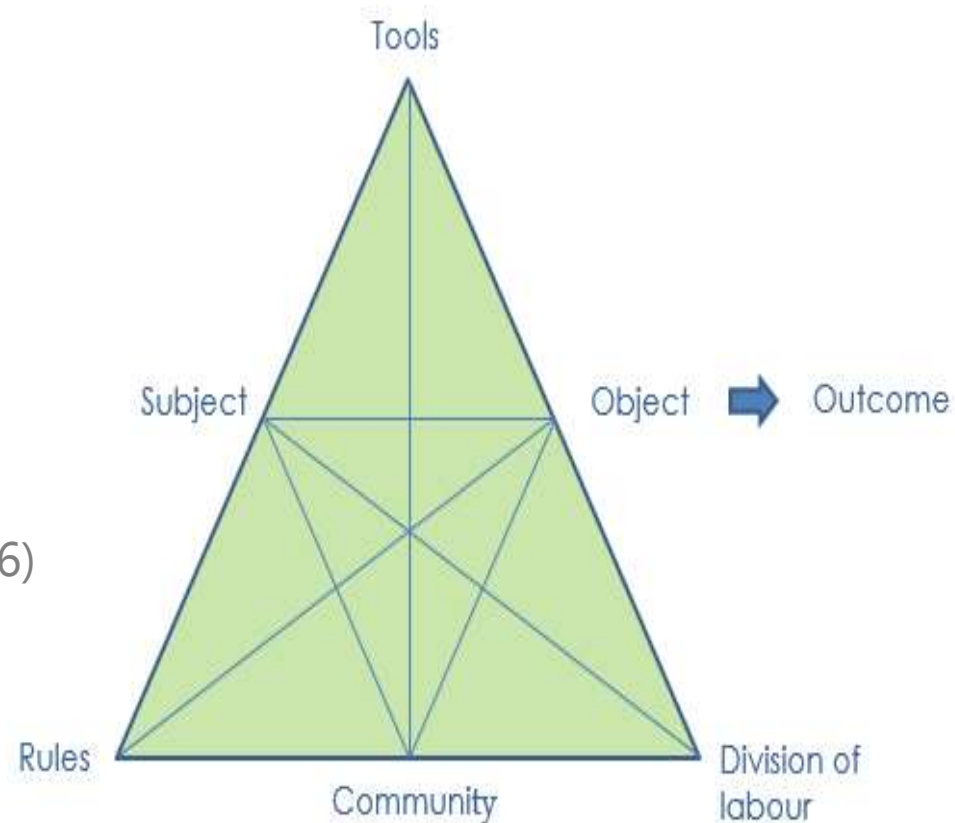


# Conceptual framework

- Activity Theory as heuristic to thickly describe changes in educators' practices and perceptions
- Explanatory device to capture change and 'contradictions' as sites of change/adaption/innovation
- Captures system in which educators strive for/consider their object
- Examine effect of adding two new tools:
  - Creative Commons (CC) licenses
  - MOOC platform (broadly conceived)

# Conceptual framework

- Activity Theory (Engeström 1987)
  - tools, rules, community, division of labour, object
  - 'Subjects' (lead educators) strive towards 'object' (developing new interdisciplinary field) in an *activity system*
  - Activity systems are object-directed
- Context is not just 'out there' (Nardi 1996)
  - Mental processes and acts inextricably entwined with context
- Locate educators' practices and perceptions in context of mediating artefacts



# Conceptual framework

- **Openness 1- Hodgkinson –Williams (2014)**

the factors influencing the ease of adopting OEPs  
synthesis from literature

1. **Technical openness** – e.g. interoperability and open formats, technical skill and resources, availability and discoverability
2. **Legal openness** – e.g. open licensing knowledge and advice.
3. **Cultural openness** – e.g. knowledge (on a continuum between homogenous and diverse) and curriculum (on a continuum between institutionalised and autonomous)
4. **Pedagogical openness** – e.g. student demographics and types of engagement (who is the imagined audience? Is it conventional or imagined as diverse contextually differentiated e.g. pedagogic strategy (choices around how one teaches and facilitates learning – dialogic, didactic, collaborative, experimental)
5. **Financial openness** (should OERs be free or come with a modest financial price tag?)

# Conceptual framework

- **Openness 2-** Beetham (2012) features of open practices  
features of paradigmatic openness, empirically developed
  1. **Opening up content** to students not on campus/formally enrolled
  2. **Sharing** and collaborating on content with other practitioners
  3. **Re-using** content in teaching contexts
  4. Using or **encouraging others** to use open content
  5. Making knowledge **publicly accessible**
  6. Teaching learning in **open contexts**

# Methodology

- Case study analysis
- Insert educator 'subjectivity' into analysis, via:
  - open-ended semi-structured interviews
  - post-MOOC reflection focus groups
- Theory framed analysis
- Code according to Activity Theory nodes, openness, emerging themes

# Methodology

- Interviews before MOOC, immediately after, 6 months later
- Interviewees: 2 MOOC lead educators + 13 guest educators
- Longitudinal (change over time)
- *For this analysis - one MOOC at two time intervals (before and immediately after)*

# Findings

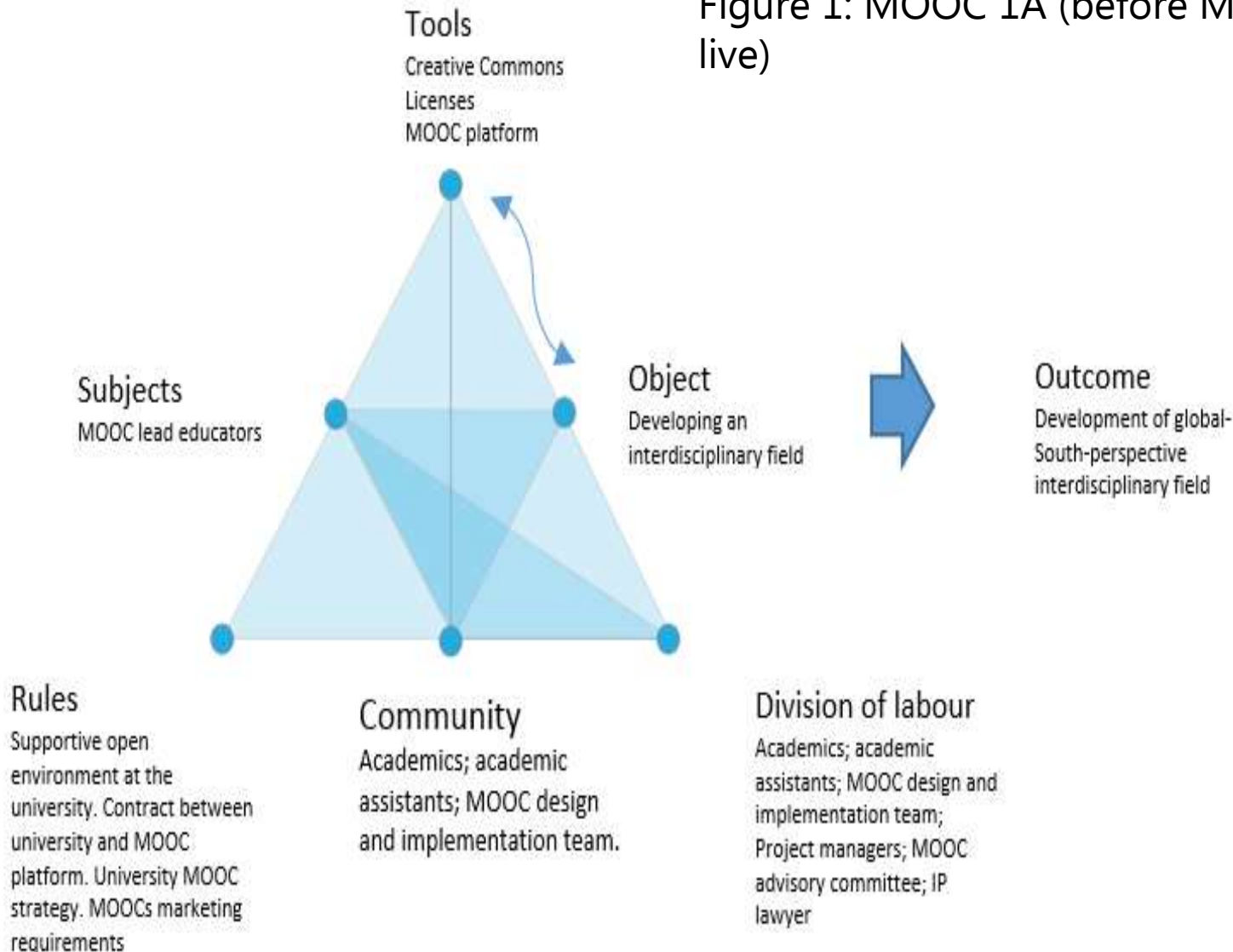
Tool node mediates subjects' (lead educators) striving toward object; we found that educators:

- 1) Engaged with the role of OER and openness in MOOCs
- 2) Perceived affordances of the MOOC format
- 3) Reflected on educational practices in different contexts



# Activity System 1

Figure 1: MOOC 1A (before MOOC is live)



# Activity system 1

## *Understandings of OER/Perceived role of openness*

### Nascent understanding of OER

- Two of 14 educators familiar with OER or broad open movement
- Understandings of openness general: *"it's free for everybody and open access"* (LF)
- None of the 14 academics articulated a relationship between intellectual property copy right and CC licenses and how the latter can transform educational resources into OERs
- Interviews revealed that educators did not create OER for the MOOC (or transform the MOOC into an OER) for ideological or theoretical reasons
- Majority positive about open character of MOOC

# Activity system 1, themes

## *Understandings of OER/Perceived role of openness*

### Reaching out beyond the university

Access to knowledge which is *“all nicely packaged into tertiary institutions and never goes anywhere”* (ML)

MOOC serve as *“social responsiveness”* to communities and continent (ML)

Access and reach beyond conventional university setting

# Activity system 1, themes

## *Affordances of the MOOC*

### Tentative understandings of what MOOCs might do

*“one step in the right direction” (LE1) to “build mass critical thinking” (LE1) and start a “conversation” (LE2) about their interdisciplinary field*

MOOC accessibility as *“opportunity” to “find new collaborations around the world” (LE2)*

*“unless you put something out there you’re not going to create new links” (LE2)*

Absent entry requirements, MOOC could act as *“sort of levelling platform” (LE2)*

MOOC constitutes a tangible *“archive of an idea” (LE1)*

# Activity system 1, themes

## *Reflection on educational practices*

*"You've got seven minutes to put across maybe a whole range of complex ideas, you have to think about each word, each phrase, each sentence, you have to script it quite carefully, you have to engage people" (LE2)*

# Activity system 1, themes

## *Reflection on educational practices*

### Reflection on course design:

*"[I]n terms of structure... the MOOC, because of the framework, has given me some new skills after 20 years of doing this, to think about how to structure assignments, students' engagement with the lectures, so that's also been really helpful." (LE1)*

# Activity system 1, themes

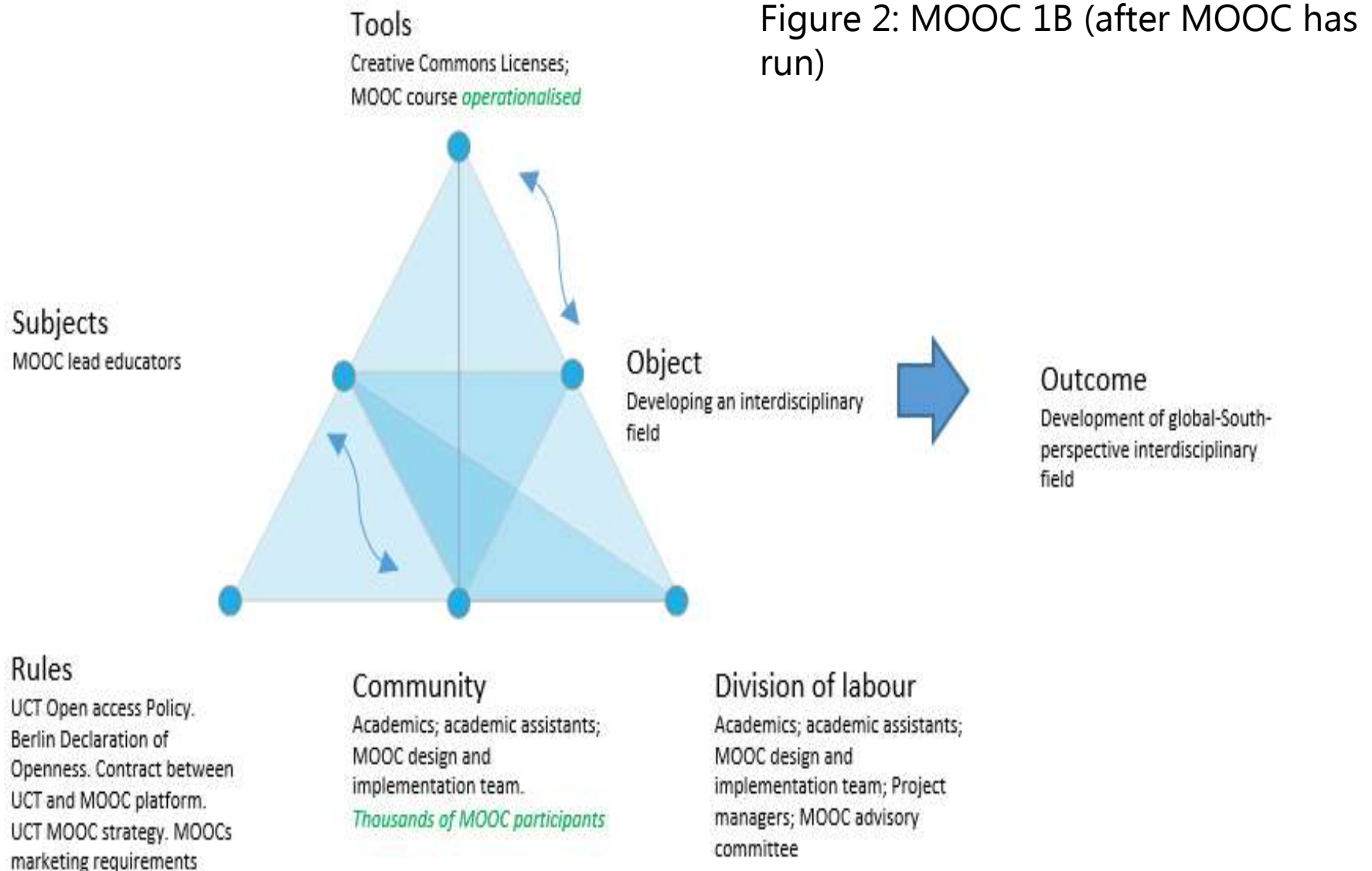
## *Reflection on educational practices*

Developing the MOOC had taught her/him *“how to start thinking about bridging online and offline”* in her/his teaching (LE1)

Brought home the *“significance of building an archive”* which would permit global access for their new field (LE1)



# Activity System 2



# Activity System 2

Two significant differences between the first and second activity systems

- 1) MOOC and its OER components are operationalised, i.e., the course has gone live and has run its six week duration
- 2) Thousands of new participants (MOOC learners) have entered the community node of the activity system

# Activity system 2, themes

## *Understandings of OER/Perceived role of openness*

### Understanding of openness as reach and access

MOOC's global open reach enabled personal and intellectual *"synergies"* between participants (LE1)

For developing new field, MOOC is more effective than *"even the biggest conferences"* where it's a *"relatively small audience that you reach"* (LE2)

Ideas in MOOC received and reflected in a wide diversity of contexts (which university can't achieve) (LE2)

# Activity system 2, themes

## *Affordances of the MOOC*

### Participation and contribution of MOOC participants

MOOC fostered "*bi-directional*" learning with "many people offering useful readings, links, poetry, Youtube clips etc." (HM)

LE2: "I felt more **and** *more like a learner and less and less like a teacher*. I was learning as much from people's comments as anybody else – - I was fascinated to see the interpretations that people brought the other resources that people brought, the perspectives that they brought that enhanced what we had put out there"

# Activity system 2, themes

## *Affordances of the MOOC*

Participation and contribution of MOOC participants

As participants add content the archive *“builds itself up”* (LE1)

*“profundity of space” for fostering wide community, which one  
“cannot achieve in a university classroom”* (LE1)

MOOC was able to *“tap into deep reservoirs of people’s interests”*  
(LE1)

# Activity system 2, themes

## *Affordances of the MOOC*

### Depth and quality of engagement

MOOC enables *“depth of engagement”* (LE2)

*“If I could get that level of engagement from all my students it would be amazing”* (LE2)

*“I see the potential of deep learning online where you never meet the participants face to face”* (LE2).

LE2 convinced that *“the online space was just as deep and in some cases a lot more intimate than a classroom space, a face to face space”* (LE2)

# Activity system 2, themes

## *Affordances of the MOOC*

### Power relations and reuse

Global accessibility, no entry requirements made learning environment more *"flat"* and *"egalitarian"* (LE2)

MOOC's afterlife: use for classroom teaching and *"spawning new research ideas"* (LE1)



# Activity system 2, themes

## *Reflection on educational practices*

Focus attention on content presentation

Reconsider offering same lecture “40 times”, educator  
*“probably a bit tired by now”* (LE2)

*“whereas if I thought about it in the way we did with the MOOCs and set it up and scripted it and thought about exactly what I really want to emphasise here and what questions did I want to ask, I’d have a more engaged student response - I’m sure I would... it’s about the preparation of the material and the presentation of it”* (LE2)

# Activity system 2, themes

## *Reflection on educational practices*

### Formation of learning communities

*“There’s something about the formation of a community, and the irony is that it seemed to have congealed in a more palpable way on the MOOC site, than it does in my face to face teaching” (LE1)*

# Activity system 2, themes

## *Reflection on educational practices*

### New ideas for traditional face-to-face teaching

- Opportunities for social media use in face-to-face teaching  
*"So it's alerting you to a, kind of, a research agenda, but...and at the same time, to the possibility of a social media for teaching". [LE1]*
- LE1 wanted to *"try and see if what I've learnt from the MOOC, in terms of the significance of community, and really, sharing of stories, can somehow build that back into our undergraduate teaching"*.
- Use components of the MOOC as a *"springboard"* for classroom teaching .(LE1)

# Concluding remarks

Activity theory useful conceptual framework for tracking educator practices in “authentic contexts” (Porter 2013)

AT enabled thick description of educators’ changing perceptions of

- Affordances of the MOOC
- The role of Openness

Allowed tracking of educators’ reconceptualisation of face-to-face teaching and intent to change practices

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